

SUPRAMONDAN LOTUS AND BUDDHA

BY

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The lotus is the most beautiful of flowers, and the most beautiful lotus is that which, emerging from water, blossoms in the open air. The lotus emerging from water and undefiled by it is a symbol of transcendence, and Indian literature frequently uses it to highlight superhuman qualities.

Buddha Śākyamuni devoted the four or seven weeks following his enlightenment to meditation. During the fifth, seated under the Goatherd's Banyan tree, he wondered whether he should keep secret or preach to a wide audience the hard-to-understand truths he had discovered. Before making a decision, he examined the world and found that beings fall into three categories: beings of lower, middle or higher qualities, in the same way as, on the ponds, among the blue, red or white lotuses, born in the water and grow in the water, some do not emerge from the water and bloom at the bottom, some rise to the surface of the water, and some finally emerge from the water and are not not soiled by it.¹

The Buddha, the best of beings, must obviously be ranked among the latter. According to the testimony of the oldest texts, his disciples compared him to a lotus "rising from the waters":

Suttanipāṭa, c. 547, p. 101. - As a pretty white lotus is not defiled by water, so you are not defiled neither by meritorious actions, nor by bad actions, nor by both at the same time.

Anguttara, III, p. 347; Madhyama, T 26, k. 29, p. 608c22-25. - Just as a white lotus, fragrant and pleasant, born in water and arrived at growth, is not defiled ~~defiled~~ so the Buddha born in the world, detaches himself from it and does by ~~water~~ not is not the world, as a lotus is not by water.

But I will confine myself here to discussing a well-known passage of scripture, which I shall call the Logoion of the Lotus, by which the Buddha himself asserts his own superiority. The Pāli scriptures (Samyutta, III, p. 140; Anguttara, II, p. 38-39) formulate it as follows: Seyyathāpi bhikkhave uppalam vā

(1) Vinaya, I, p. 6; Digha, 11, p. 38; Majjhima, I, p. 169; Samyutta, I, p. 138.

padumam va pundarikam va udake jatam udake samvaḍḍham udakā accuggamma thāti anupalittam udakena, evam eva kho bhikkhave tathagato loke jāto loke samvaḍḍho lokam abhibhuyya viharati anupalitto lokena. - Just as, O monks, the blue lotus, the red lotus or the white lotus, born in water and raised in water, rises above water and remains undefiled by water, so, O monks, the Tathāgata born in the world, grown up in the world, after having dominated the world, remains undefiled by the world.

The general idea is clear: the Tathāgata, that is to say the Buddha, the Saint (arahant), is superior to the world (lokuttara). But what is this world which he surpasses and dominates, and in what does his superiority consist? Has he severed all ties with the world, or does he still remain within him? In other words, is he a human being (sattva) or is he no longer human?

The Lotus Logion has been the subject of much discussion, and we will here examine the various interpretations given to it by the canonical Sūtras and the Syllabus or Treatises of the various Buddhist schools which formed during the last centuries of the era. Ancient.

I. THE LOTUS LOGION IN THE CANONICAL SŪTRAS.

Two Suttas appearing in the Pāli Nikaya and finding their correspondents in the Sanskrit Agama come into play here: 1. The Puppham or Vaddham Sutta of the Samyutta-Nikaya (III, p. 138-140) and a Sūtra of the Samyukta-Agama (T 99, k. 2, p. 86 15-8c 7). 2. The Loke Sutta of the Anguttara-Nikaya (II, p. 37-39) to which two Sūtras of the Samyukta-Agama correspond (T 99, k. 4, p. 28a 20-28b 18; T 100, k. 13, pp. 467a 26-467b 27), and an Ekottara-Agama Sūtra (T 125, k. 31, pp. 717c 18-718a 12).

The Sanskrit Nikaya pāli and Agama are independently constituted and differ both in the number of Sūtras they encompass and in the way they are treated: topics that appear in one are missing in the other and vice versa. However, doctrinally they are closely related; is that they rest on a common basis: a primitive canon of which nothing has come down to us.² According to E. Lüders,³ the Canon of the Buddhist Scriptures in Pāli and in Sanskrit is based on an 'Urkanon' in dialect Oriental. This dialect essentially corresponds to the Māgadhi of the Aśoka inscriptions, but represents a later stage of linguistic evolution.

Be that as it may, if a given topic is treated in parallel in the Nikaya and the Āgama, one can assume that it was already found in the primitive Canon. The accord between the Pāli tradition and the Sanskrit tradition otherwise guarantees

(2) Cf. F. Weller, "Die Überlieferung des Älteren Buddhistischen Schrifttums", Asia Major, V, fasc. 2 (1928), p. 149-182.

(3) E. Lüders, "Beobachtungen über die Sprache des Buddhistischen Urkanons", Abk. d. Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 10 (1954), p. 8.

its authenticity, at least its seniority. This is not the case with the Lotus Logion, which appears in the Puppham and the Loke Sutta of the Pali recension, but does not appear in their four Sanskrit counterparts.

What makes it even more suspect is how it was reproduced in the Pali Loke Sutta. We have seen above that it was addressed to monks (bhikkhave). However, in the Loke Sutta, the only interlocutor of the Buddha was the Brahmin Dona. Normally the Buddha should have introduced the comparison with the words seyyathapi brāhmaṇo "as well as, O Brahman", but the text ö him say seyyathapi bhikkhave, "as well as, O monks" (Arguttara, II, p. 38, line 30), while the monks do not intervene in the story. On the other hand, this inconsistency is corrected at the end of the quotation which concludes by saying: Buddhō ti mam brahmaṇa dhārehi ti, "take me then for Buddha, O Brahman" (ibid., p. 39, line 3).

On the other hand, if the Lotus Logion can find its place in the Loke Sutta, it seems out of context in the Puppham Sutta, and since the Sanskrit recensions do not mention it in its stereotyped form, one can wonder if it has not been improperly incorporated into the two Pali Suttas. However, if there was any interpolation, it was prior to the fifth century, since Buddhaghosa explains a few terms of it in his Commentaries on the Samyutta (II, p. 320) and the Anguttara (III, p. 79).

Here is a condensed translation of the two Pali Suttas, partly inspired by the explanations provided by Buddhaghosa.

1. Puppham Sutta (Samyutta, III, pp. 138-140).

In Savatthi, the Bhagava said: It is not me who argues with the world [of beings], it is the world (of beings) that argues with me. A truth-teller argues with no one in the world. What is not admitted in the world of the wise, I say, too, that it is not. What is admitted in the world of the wise, I say, myself, that it is.

What is not allowed in the world of the wise that I, too, say not to be? That [the five aggregates], matter, sensation, notion, volitions and knowledge are permanent, stable, eternal and immutable, this is not admitted in the world of the sages; and I say, too, that it is not.

What is allowed in the world of the wise and what I too say exist? That [the five aggregates]: matter, sensation, notion, volitions and con-birth are impermanent, painful and subject to change is allowed in the world of the wise, and I, too, say that it is.

There are dhammas in the process of decomposition (loke loka-dhamma) in the world; these are [the five aggregates], matter, sensation, notion, volitions and knowledge, which the Tathāgata comprehends and penetrates. Having understood and penetrated them, he proclaims them, teaches, makes known, establishes, analyzes and manifests. If, after that, someone does not know, does not see, he is a fool, a profane, a blind person, deprived of vision, knowledge and sight. What can I do with it?

Follows the Logoion of the Lotus which ends the Sutta.

The Buddha does not argue with the world of beings (sattaloka), this world of

profane people who believe in the existence of the Atman, of a permanent, happy, personal and pure entity. chat with anyone in the world. On the other hand, he fully agrees with the world of the wise (loko panditanam): he denies what they reject, he affirms what they admit.

The problem dealt with here concerns the five Khandhas (khandhapañcaka), the five psychophysical aggregates of existence out of which the idea of the "I am" arises in lay people: rupa, vedanā, saññā, sankhāra and viññāṇa. The sages, and the Buddha in the first place, deny that they are permanent, stable, eternal and immutable: they are not a self and do not belong to a self. On the contrary, they are impermanent, painful, and subject to change. Hence the dialogue so often engaged between the Buddha and his disciples:?

-What do you think then, O monks, what are the five khandhas: permanent or impermanent?

-Impermanent, Lord.

— But what is impermanent, is it pain or happiness?

-Pain, Lord.

-And then what is impermanent, painful and subject to change, can one, when one considers it, say: this is mine, that I am, this is my me?

"We can't, Lord.

-Therefore, O monks, all Khandha, past, future or present, internal or external, etc..., is not mine, I am not, he is not my

me: this is what must be seen in truth according to correct knowledge.

The five Khandhas, like the twelve Ayatanas and the eighteen Dhatu, encompass all the conditioned formations (sankhāra or sankhatadhamma), arising from causes and conditions. The Khandhas, being born, during a very short and perishing time, evolve from all eternity in the cycle of existences according to a production in dependence (paliccasamuppāda) with twelve members, the mechanism of which was discovered by the Buddhas, but did not been made by them.⁸

In the present Sutta, the five Khandhas are designated by the term loka-dhamma, literally "things of this world", but it should be understood with the Pali Commentary: "things in process of decomposition because their nature is to decompose : lujjanasabhāvata". This interpretation is based on an erroneous etymology linking loka to the root luji "to break", while it derives from the root loki "to shine". The etymology is common in the canonical texts where we read, for example: "It is spoken of loka; why call it-

(4) Commentary on Samyutta, II, p. 320: "Aniccam dukkham anattā asubhan" ti yathāsabhāvena vadantena saddhim "niccam sukham attā subhan" ti vadanto vivadati.

(5) Majjhima, II, p. 147.

(6) Khemo Sutta of Samyutta, III, p. 126-132.

(7) Vinaya, I, p. 14; Majjhima, I, p. 138-139; Samyutta, II, p. 124-125; Catuspariṣat-sutra, ed. Waldschmidt, 1957, p. 164-168.

(8) Bhiksusutra of the Nidanasamyukta, ed. Tripathi, 1962, p. 164-165.

(9) Commentary on Samyutta, II, p. 320.

do we like this? It is called so because it breaks". 10 The etymology will rightly be criticized by the Mahāyānists, but however inaccurate it may be, it has the merit of insisting on the obsolescence of the Khanda.

Everything that is destined to be born is destined to perish. 12 Subject to this standard, the five aggregates are the lokadhammas in process of decomposition. It is thus that the Tathāgata "understands them, penetrates them and proclaims them..." By the very fact, he understands, penetrates and proclaims the true Nature of things (dharmaṇām dharmatā) or their conditioned production which remains stable, that the Buddha appear or not in the world. 13 The Tathagata does not know those ^{what} to do with pro- who are ignorant of the Dharmatā: he does not argue with them.

2. Loke Sutta (Anguttara, II, pp. 37-39)

One day, the Blessed One, walking on the main road between Ukkatṭha and Setabhya, left his footprints on the ground, with their thousand-spoked wheels, their rims, their hubs and their complete attributes. The Brahmin Dona came after him and, noticing these footprints, said to himself: what an extraordinary marvel! They will certainly not be the footprints of a human being. He followed them and finally discovered, at some distance from the road, the Buddha seated under a tree, his legs crossed, holding his body erect and fixing his attention straight ahead. Dona approaches and says to him: "Won't your Lordship be a deva, a god?" - "No, brahman, I will not be a deva", - "Will she then be a gandharva, celestial musician, a yakkha, celestial spirit?" - "No, brahman". "So she will be a manussa, man?" - "No more" - "If she is none of these, who will she be?" "In me", finally explains the Buddha, "have been destroyed forever these asava, perverse influxes, which could make me become a deva, a gandharva, a yakkha or a man. Know, O Brahman, that I am Buddha".

The Sutta ends with the Lotus Logion which, as we have seen, is missing in the corresponding Sanskrit-Chinese recension. It is followed by a few stanzas in which the comparison of the lotus appears: "As a pretty white ^{lotus is} defiled by water, so I am not defiled by the world", that is to say to say, as the Commentary explains (III, p. 79), by the world of conditioned formations (saṃkhāraloka).

Amazed by the imprint of the Buddha's footsteps, the Brahmin Doṇa wonders what form of existence will be of one who possesses such characteristics.

(10) Samyutta, IV, p. 52.

(11) For the Prajñāpāramitāsūtra, the five Skandhas are designated by the name of Loka, not as they break, but on the contrary "as they do not break and disintegrate" (na lujyante na pralujyante). Indeed, the five Skandhas not existing in their own nature have Emptiness as their own nature, and this Emptiness itself does not break, does not disintegrate. - Cf. Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, ed. Wogihara, 1932, p. 538. (12)

Digha, I, p. 110; Majjhima, I, p. 380; Samyutta, IV, p. 47; Anguttara, IV, p. 186: Yam kinci samudayadhammam sabban tam nirodhadhammam.

(13) Widespread canonical cliché: Samyutta, II, p. 25: Uppādā vā tathāgatānam anuppādā vā tathāgatānam thitā va sā dhātu dhammatṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā idappaccayatā.

teristics. Whatever the Commentary says, with F.L. Woodward¹⁴ we must leave the verb *bhavissati* its future meaning. The Master, seated under the tree, shows himself to him in his human form. Will he later be a god, a demi-god or simply a man? The Master declares to him that he will not assume any form of existence in the future, but that from now on he is Buddha. And he gives him the reason: he has eliminated all the *Asava* by virtue of which he could assume any form of existence. In other words, he will escape rebirths, and this human existence will be his last.

Indeed, he has completely freed himself from the *Āsava*, literally from the perverse flows or influxes that vitiate the triple world. They are three or four in number: attachment to the five sensual pleasures (*kāmāśava*) of the material world, attachment to the bliss of the world of subtle matter and the immaterial world (*bhavāśava*), attachment to false views (*ditthāśava*), as belief in personality, and attachment arising from ignorance (*avij-jāśava*) of Buddhist truths. ^{such} 15

The elimination of these passions and these ignorances results in the appearance of five pure aggregates, *Anāsavakkhanda*, these elements of holiness which end in *Nirvāṇa*: these are morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), wisdom (*paññā*), deliverance (*vimutti*), knowledge and vision of deliverance (*vimuttiññāṇa-dassana*).

The wisdom referred to here is the "holy, unimpure, and supermundane" wisdom;¹⁶ it is a correct view bearing primarily on the conditioned production of the phenomena of existence, from which it follows that "all formations are impermanent, all formations are painful, all things are impersonal", but also that "the *Nirvāṇa* opposed to them is calm".¹⁷

The correct vision entails the elimination of errors and passions: the thought is freed from the *Asava*. This deliverance is a freedom from thought through wisdom. The ascetic who reaches it is fully aware of this: he knows and he sees that in him all the *Asava* are destroyed and will no longer reproduce themselves.

The five pure aggregates manifest themselves as soon as you enter the Path of *Nirvāṇa*, but only reach their perfection in those who no longer have to practice (*asekha*), namely in the saints (*arahant*) and in the Buddhas. Although ^{the omniscience} of a Buddha is infinitely superior to the wisdom of a saint, the Buddhas and the saints participate in the same deliverances and hold the same elements of holiness, called here *Asekhakkhandha*, aggregates of those who do not have more to practice. ^{the} 19

The five pure aggregates claim a substrate to lean on. They come to

(14) F.L. Woodward, *Gradual Sayings II* (1933), p. 44, note 1.

(15) *Digha*, II, p. 81; *Anguttara*, I, p. 165; *Majjhima Commentary*, I, p. 67.

(16) See the distinction between worldly wisdom and supermundane wisdom, in *Majjhima*, III, p. 72.

(17) These are the four Seals or Summaries of the Buddhist Law; see the references in the *Treaty of the Great Virtue of Wisdom*, Louvain, 1944-80, p. 912, 1368-70, 1684, 2189.

(18) *Aṅguttara*, III, p. 34; *Majjhima*, II, p. 129; *Samyutta*, V, p. 410: *Ettha kho pan' esaham na kinci nānākaraṇam vadāmi yad idam vimuttiya vimuttiṃ*.

(19) *Samyutta*, I, p. 99; *Anguttara*, I, p. 162.

juxtapose with the five impure aggregates, the Upādānakkhandhas of human existence to which the layman clings as his self, namely corporeality, sensation, notion, volitions and knowledge.

During the forty-five years which separate his Enlightenment from his Parinirvana, the Buddha Śākyamuni counts two series (santāna) of Khandhas: 1. The five impure Khandhas (sāsava), corporeality, sensation, notion, volitions and knowledge a Samsara who had no beginning, transmigrate through the existences of the Triple World. 2. The five pure Khandhas (anāsava), carried by the Buddha to their supreme perfection (sampadā), namely morality, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, knowledge and vision of deliverance, which separate from the world and lead to Nirvāṇa.

The first series is of a mundane order (lokika); the second is supramundane (lokullara). Equipped with the impure Khandhas, Śākyamuni manifests a human existence; endowed with pure Khandhas, he is Buddha.

The Buddhas and the saints who, during their last existence, destroyed the Asava and acceded to deliverance, retain, for some time still, the impure Khandhas which make them appear as men. Their Nirvāṇa is a Nirvāṇa "with remnant of conditioning" (sa-upadisesa), and they remain visible to gods and men. When they die and their bodies are broken, they enter Nirvana "without remnant of conditioning" (anupadisesa): gods and men will see them no more. Do they retain at least the five pure Khandhas which made them Buddhas or saints? Not at all. As a Sutta specifies,²⁰ the Venerable Sariputta entered the complete and final Nirvāṇa (parinibbata) without carrying with it such elements of holiness as morality, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, knowledge and the vision of deliverance, for, produced by the causes, they must necessarily disappear, for everything that is born must perish. But it is by these pure Khandhas that the Buddhas and the saints, while they were still in the world, were no longer defiled by the world and surpassed it. , when a Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha and the Saṃgha, he takes refuge, not in the physical persons of the saints, but in the pure Khandhas which make them Buddhas and Arahants.²¹

The Master ranked among the questions to be refused that of knowing whether the saint exists or no longer exists after death.²² Indeed, the question is badly posed, because it appeals to two opposite and incompatible domains. After their Parinirvāṇa, the Buddhas left the world of becoming subject to the laws of causality, to enter that of the absolute, escaping these same laws and unable to be defined either by affirmation or by negation. Śākyamuni who was a man by the series of five impure Khandhas, and Buddha by that of the pure Khandhas, disappears at the moment of Parinirvana, and nothing more can be said about it. But

(20) Samyutta, V, p. 162.

(21) Cf. L. de La Vallée Poussin, "Documents of Abhidharma. The doctrine of refuges", Chinese and Buddhist Mixtures 1, 1931-32, p. 65-109.

(22) On the ten or fourteen difficult questions on which the Buddha did not pronounce himself pronounced (avyākṛtavastu), see references in Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom, p. 154, in note.

his disciples are not for all that orphans: he bequeaths them the Dhamma, the doctrine of truth and holiness which he discovered and preached,²³

The ancient sources speak of the Law Body (dhammakāya) of the Buddha. This Body of the Law, as Mr. P. Demiéville remarked, is defined by the teaching ^{the} itself.²⁴ It is a body only by metaphor: "The real body by Buddhas is not material body whose devotees venerate the relics, but the teaching, the Dharma which survives the Buddha and from which are born the sons of Sakya" ²⁵ Better than the body of birth destined to perish, the teaching represents the true body of the Buddha: "Vakkali, what would be the use of seeing this body of rot? He who sees the Dhamma, he sees me."²⁶ Does this mean that the Law is eternal? A distinction must be made. All the Buddhas preach the Law and it is destined to disappear. world for a thousand years; that of the Buddhas who preceded him lasted a long time or a short time, depending on whether, at the moment of their appearance, the beings to be converted were straight or crooked. But the Buddhas who succeed one another from age to age preach always the same Law, the same truth, even by these different paths (yana),²⁷ and in this sense the Dharma is immutable.

The Lotus Logion quoted more or less aptly in the Pali Suttas does not profess the absolute transcendence of the Buddhas. Until their Parinirvāṇa, they remain in the world of becoming by their impure Khandhas, and they surpass the world by their pure Khandhas. After their Parinirvana, they are outside the world and thus escape all understanding.

II. THE LOGION OF THE LOTUS, ACCORDING TO THE SECTS.

The primacy of the Buddha has never been disputed: "Among all beings without feet, two feet, four feet, many feet, corporeal or incorporeal, conscious or unconscious, the Buddha, Arhat and Samyak-sambuddha is the very first" ²⁸ He is invoked under ten different appellations which express his unequalled qualities. He possesses unsurpassed knowledge and powers: the ten

(23) Digha, II, p. 100; III, p. 58, 77; Samyutta, III, p. 42; V, p. 144, 163.

(24) P. Demiéville, "The Chinese versions of the Milindapañha", BEFEO, XXIV, 1924, p. 69-70.

(25) L. de La Vallée Poussin, The Siddhi of Hsüan-tsang, Appendix II: The Bodies of the Buddha, p. 765.

(26) Samyutta, III, p. 120.

(27) We will say with Aśoka that everything the Buddha said is well said. But the Buddhas do not always and in all circumstances preach the same truth; their teaching is more or less complete. The reason is that, in their great compassion, they take into account the dispositions and capacities of their listeners. By conforming to the world (lokāmwartana), they do not betray the truth. Hence the speculation regarding the unique Vehicle.

(28) See the declarations of primacy (agraprajñapti): Anguttara, II, p. 34; III, p. 35; V, p. 21; Itivuttaka, p. 87; Divyavadana, ed. Cowell and Neil, 1886, p. 154; Avadānaśataka, ed. Speyer, 1902, I, p. 49, 329.

strengths, the four assurances, the four obstacle-free knowledges, the eighteen exclusive attributes, great benevolence and great compassion. His conception, his birth, his enlightenment, his public life and his Parinirvāṇa abounded in miraculous facts on which biographers have never ceased to extol. All the Buddhists proclaim him superior to the world (*lokuttara*), like the lotus emerging from the waters, but if this epithet translates their religious feeling well, it still remains vague, and its exact meaning needs to be clarified from a philosophical point of view: the Buddha is superior to the world, but what is the nature of this superiority?

The problem has been discussed in the sects or schools which were formed during the first centuries of Buddhism, sects which tradition has fixed at the number of eighteen.²⁹ From the point of view of Buddhology, that is to say beliefs relating to the Buddha, these sects fall into two groups: the supranaturalists who see in the Buddha only pure things (*anāsravadharma*) and discard everything that, in the story of Śakyamuni, is human or earthly; the rationalist sects, according to which Śakyamuni, before his Parinirvāṇa, went about pure and impure things (*anāsrava-* and *sāsravadharma*), and was as such a man and a Buddha, it being understood that what is called a man (*pudgala*) is only a series of impermanent, painful Skandhas, subject to change and not constituting a self.

1. Supranaturalist sects.

The Mahāsāṃghika and their sub-sects made themselves the interpreters of popular piety by proclaiming the Buddha superior to the world (*lokottaravāda*). Everything would be pure in the Buddha, including his birth body; his birth is purely apparitional (*upapaduka*); its existence, a mere fiction; his body is spiritual and, if he manifests outwardly human qualities and gestures which in reality are foreign to him, it is only to conform to the world (*lokānuvartana*).

Mahāsāṃghika and Vibhajyavadin base their Docetism on the Logion of Lotus formulated here as follows:

The Tathāgata, born in the world, raised in the world, whether he goes or stands, is not defiled by the dharmas of the world ³⁰

As said above, Buddhaghosa saw in the "dharma of the world" (*lokadhamma*) the five impure Khandhas in the process of decay (*lujjana*), but according to the Mahāvibhāṣā, it is rather, it would be about the human conjuncture, the eight accidents affecting the lives of humans: gain, loss, glory, discredit, blame, praise, pleasure, pain.³¹ For the docetists, the Buddha did not really meet them, or he pretended to meet them, he was not defiled by them.

(29) Among the numerous works relating to sects, I will cite only P. Demiéville, "The origin of Buddhist sects according to Paramartha", *Mixtures chinoises et bouddhiques*, I, 1931-32, p. 15-64; J. Masuda, "Origin and doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools", *Asia Major* II, 1925, p. 3-78; A. Bareau, *The Buddhist Sects of the Small Vehicle*, 1955.

(30) Mahāvibhāṣā, T 1545, k. 44, p. 229a17-19; k. 76, p. 391c28-392a1; k. 173, p. 871c2-5.

(31) Digha, III, p. 260; Anguttara, II, p. 188; IV, p. 157; V, p. 53.

Mahāsāṃghika Docetism is clearly formulated in the preface to the *Mahāvastu* which does not constitute, it is true, the oldest portion of the text: "Among the fully and perfectly enlightened Buddhas, absolutely nothing in common with the world; great sages, everything is superior to the world (*sarvam lokottaram*); their very birth is supramundane" (I. p. 159). It is at the end of ten months that all the Bodhisattvas come out of their mother's womb by the right side, but without piercing the side" (I. p. 148). "Transcending the conduct of the Blessed, transcending his root good! Walking, standing, sitting or lying are transcendent in the Sage. The body of the Sugata which operates the destruction of the bonds of existence is also transcendent: the thing is beyond doubt. The wearing of clothes in the Sage is transcendent: the thing is beyond doubt; the ingestion of food in the Sugata is similarly transcendent. The teaching given by these heroic men is held to be entirely transcendent, and in truth I will proclaim the greatness of these supremely intelligent beings. Meeting the favorable place and time and the maturity of the proper act, the Leaders preach the truthful or salutary Law. The Buddhas conform humanly to mundane usages, while also complying with supramundane conventions. These superior men adopt the four attitudes, but no fatigue falls on these beneficent beings. They wash their feet, but the dust does not adhere to them, and their feet are like the flower of the lotus: this is pure conformity. The Sambuddhas bathe, but the defilement is not in them and their image is like the golden disc: this is pure conformism... Masters of stopping the Karman (if they wanted to), the Victors manifest the Karman and conceal their sovereignty: this is pure conformity. They take food, but hunger does not torment them: it is to provide men with the opportunity to give, and out of pure conformity... Although the body of the Sugata is not the result of a sexual union, the Buddhas mention their mother and their father: this is pure conformity" (I, p. 167–170).

Of Sarvāstivādin provenance, but very close to the Mahayānist Vaipulya, the *Lalitavistara* (Ch. VIII, p. 118-119) puts into the mouth of the young Śākyamuni stanzas of an identical resonance: "When I was born, this trichiliocosm was shaken; Śakra, Brahma, the Asura, the Mahoraga, Candra and Surya, as well as Vaisravana and Kumāra, bowing their heads at my feet, paid me homage. What other god would be distinguished from me by his superiority? .. I am the god superior to the *dicux* (*devātideva*), superior to all the gods (*uttamaḥ sarvadevaiḥ*); not a god is like me; how could there be one, superior? By conforming myself to the world, that is how I will go. Gods and men will agree in saying: "He is god by himself (*svayam eva devaḥ*)".

The Docetism of the Mahāsāṃghika found warm partisans, not only among the related sects, Caitika, Pūrva- and Aparāśaila, established in the mountainous regions of the Andhra country, but also among the northern Buddhists known by the vague term of Uttarapathaka. Vainly opposed by the Sinhalese Theravada and the Sarvāstivāda of the Indian continent, Docetism was one of the basic positions of Mahāyānist Buddhism, both in its Sinhalese (*Vetullavāda*) and Indian (school of *Madhyamika* and *Vijñā-*navādin**) forms.

The Treatises on sects compiled by Vasumitra, Bhavya and Vinitadeva,³² formulate some fifteen docetist propositions which they attribute in common to the Mahasamghika and their sub-sects: the Buddhas are lokottara; they are free from impure dharma (sasrava); all their speeches are in relation to the preaching of the Law which they can expound by a single emission of voice (ekavāgudahāra); all the Sūtras enunciated by them are of precise and definitive meaning (nitārtha); their material body (rūpakāya), their power (prabhāva) and the span of their life (ayuhpramāṇa) are unlimited; immersed in perpetual concentration of mind, they experience no fatigue in preaching the Law, in answering questions, in arranging their sentences; they understand all things in a single moment of thought; until their entry into Parinirvana, they always have the double liberating knowledge present: that of the destruction of impurities (asravakṣaya) and that of their non-reproduction (anutpada) in the future.

Although it is to combat them, the Kathāvatthu attributes analogous theses to the Mahāsāṃghika, the Andhaka, the Uttarāpathaka and the Vetulyaka: The Buddhas are everywhere present in all regions of the universe (XXI, 6, p. 608) and can suspend natural laws by their miraculous power (XXI, 4, p. 606); their behavior (vyavahāra) is transcendent (II, 10, p. 221); the very smell of their excrement surpasses all perfumes (XVIII, 4, p. 563); they never resided in the world of men (XVIII, 1, p. 559).

The theories presented here deny the Buddha any historical truth. According to ancient biographers, Śākyamuni, even after his enlightenment, experienced calumny, contracted illnesses, suffered rejections and affronts, and suffered bad weather. But the Saint, out of the world, escapes contingencies, and suffering has no hold on him. Its fortunes and misfortunes are only apparent. If he simulates pain, it is to conform to the world and in the interest of beings to be converted.

Docetism professed by the supranaturalist sects was transmitted to Mahāyāna and found its place both in the school of Madhyamaka and in that of Vijñānavāda. From the first Vaipulyasūtras, the Buddha attains such transcendence that he escapes the world of becoming to merge with the True Nature of things (dharmāṇām dharmata) which has as its unique character the absence of any character,³³ and cannot be defined in any way, since it has crossed the limits of being and non-being. Itself is nothing, for True Nature is void of True Nature.³⁴

The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras affirm that in perfection of wisdom one perceives neither being, nor dharma, nor conditioned production, nor arhat, nor pratyekabuddha, nor bodhisattva, nor buddha, because of absolute purity (atyantaviśuddhitā),³⁵

(32) Cf. A. Barcau, "Three Treatises on Buddhist Sects attributed to Vasumitra, Bhavya and Vinitadeva", *Asian Journal*, 1954, p. 229-266; 1956, p. 167-200.

(33) *Paicavinsatisāhasrik Prajñāpāramitā*, ed. Dutt. p. 164, 225, 24, 258, 21, 262, etc.: Sarva ete dharma ekalah sana yadnt alakṣaṇaḥ.

(34) *Ibid.*, p. 132, line 7: Dharmata dharmatāsvabhāvena śūnya.

(35) *Ibid.*, p. 146. lines 9-17. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, p. 159 and following, declares all dharma like magic, like a dream.

Vimalakīrti saw the Tathāgata as if nothing was to be seen. The Tathāgata is out of time and place, shows no character; it is neither defiled nor purified.³⁶

The Madhyamakasastra concludes from this that the Tathagata does not exist in any way (*sarvatha na sambhavaty eva tathagataḥ*),³⁷ and cites numerous Vaipulyas in support of this assertion: "Those who have seen me in a material form and who are guided on my voice, those men engaged in these false and ruinous views, will never see me. It is by the Law that the Buddhas must be seen, for the Leaders are Bodies of the Law (*dharmakāya*). The nature of things itself, being unknowable, cannot be discerned".

Beings are empty of me and mine; things, deprived of their own nature and of specific characteristics, are neither born nor destroyed. The Buddha is neither inside nor outside the Skandhas, pure or impure, for these are without production or destruction. His true body is a doctrinal body, an abstraction in terms of which the absence of any character is the True Character, empty itself of self-nature and specification.

To the speculations of the Madhyamikas which have just been briefly sketched here, were added those of the Vijñānavādin who in turn proposed various varieties of still more subtle docetism.

2. Rationalist sects

I mean here by rationalist sects those which, while magnifying the Buddha, still recognize something human in him. They stay close to canonical teachings and do not dispute the historicity of the Buddha Śākya-provided.

As we have seen above, the Kathāvatthu evoked the theses of the Mahāsāṃghika, the Andhaka and Uttarapathaka only to combat them. On the Indian continent, the most declared adversaries of Docetism were the Sarvāstivādin-Vaibhāṣika.

The Mahāvibhāṣā of the Arhat Kaśmiriens devotes a long passage to the subject which occupies us (T 1545, k. 76, p. 391a6-392c6); L. de La Vallée Poussin translated it into French under the title: *Is the body of the Arhat pure?* in the Chinese and Buddhist Mixtures, Brussels, I, 1931-32, p. 110-115.

The Mahāvibhāṣā begins by evoking the Lotus Logion from which the Mahāsāṃghika and others used the argument to claim that the body of the Buddha is pure, or in other words, that all the dharmas of the Arhat are pure. It was to misunderstand the text. When he says "The Tathagata, born in the world, grown up in the world": it is about the body of birth (*janmakāya*); when he says: "stands above the world, is not defiled by the dharmas of the world (*loka-dharma*)": it is about the body of the Law (*dharmakaya*) of the Buddha. The birth body is impure (*sāsrava*); the body of the Law is pure (*anasrava*).

(36) The Teaching of Vimalakīrti, Louvain, 1962, p. 355.

(37) Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikās with Candrakīrti's Prasannapada, ed. L. de La Vallée Poussin, 1903, p. 435, 1.5.

(38) Ibid., p. 448.

By birth body is meant an assemblage of psychophysical phenomena comprising matter (rūpa), sensation (vedanā), notion (saṃjñā), volitions (saṃskāra), and knowledge (vijñāna); in a word, the five Skandhas, arising from causes and conditions, supporting existence, engaged from all eternity in the unfolding of Samsara with its births, old ages, illnesses and dead, mistakenly taken for a personality, hotbed of ignorance and passion.

Śākyamuni's birthplace is impure, not only because his body born from Āsrava, but also because he gives birth to Āsrava in other beings: desire (rāga) in Anupama, hatred (dveṣa) in Angulimāla, pride (mana) in Garvita (?), crreur (moha) in Uruvilvākāśyapa.

During his last existence, the Buddha experienced the fortunes and misfortunes of all human destiny: those eight accidents designated under the name of loka-dharma: gain (labha) and loss (alābha), glory (paśas) and discredit (ayasas)., blame (ninda) and praise (praśamsā), pleasure (sukha) and pain (duḥkha). They were, for the most part, the pleasant or unpleasant results of the good or bad acts done by him during his previous existences.

To prove that the birth body of the Buddha, subject to the maturation of acts, is exclusively impure, the Mahāvibhāṣā appeals to the Nivṛtasūtra of the Nīdanasamyukta (p. 140-144) which says: "Covered by ignorance (avidyā), hindered by desire (trṣṇa), the fool (bala) and the wise (pandita) make for themselves a body endowed with thought (savijñānaka kaya)".⁴⁰ Now, continues the Vibhāṣā, Bhagavat is included among the wise; the fruit of ignorance and desire; therefore the body of the Buddha is certainly impure.

That the eight lokadharma affected the impure body of the Buddha, inflicting wounds and causing disease, is obvious. Indeed, these eight lokadharms are in conformity with the world and the world is in conformity with the eight lokadharms.⁴¹ But, according to the Mahāvibhāṣā, the Buddha does not not record them mentally. He encounters gain, glory, praise and pleasure, without his thought producing exaltation or satisfaction. He encounters loss, discredit, blame and suffering, without his mind being depressed or discontented. But he derives this impassiveness, not from the five psychophysical aggregates forming his impure body, but from the elements of truth and

(39) Theravādin and Sarvāstivādin affirm that after his enlightenment, Buddha Śākyamuni atoned by torments and illnesses for the faults of his previous lives: Brahmins accused him of the murder of Sundari, Cīṇa slandered him, a stone thrown by Devadatta hit him in the big toe, an acacia thorn pierced his foot, he suffered from headaches and rheumatism in his back, he had to eat barley in Vērañja, he himself devoted himself for six years to cruel mortifications; begging his food in a Brahmin village, he returned with an empty bowl. On all these events, see the references in the Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom, I, p. 507-511; IV p. 1762-1774.

Sources holding them to be authentic include the Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin (Gilgit Manuscripts, ed. Dutt, III, Part I, p. 211-218; T 1448, k. 18, p. 94-96), the Pūbbakam - mapiloti, section 387 of the Apadana pāli, I, p. 299-301, and the Hing k'i hing king (T 197) translated into Chinese by the Sogdian monk Kang Mong siang, in 194 p. vs.

(40) See the corresponding Pāli Sutta, in Samyutta, II, p. 23-25.

(41) Anguttara, IV, p. 156: Auth' ime lokadhamma lokam anuparivattanti, loka ca aṭṭha lokadhamme anuparivattati.

holiness which makes him a Buddha. So then, when the Lotus Logion affirms that he is undefiled by the dharmas of the world, he has in view, not his *janmakaya*, but his *dharmakaya*. Although in the present passage the *Mahāvibhāṣā* does not define it, this *dharmakaya* is the series of pure dharmas (*anāsravadharmasamtana*) characterizing the Buddhas and the Saints, namely: morality, concentration, wisdom, deliverance, knowledge and vision of deliverance.

In Indian literature, the lotus symbolizes transcendence. The Lotus Logion, introduced in the Buddhist Sutras, draws a comparison between the lotus "born in water and raised in water, rising above water and undefiled by water" and the *Tathāgata* "born in the world, raised in the world, having dominated the world and remaining undefiled by the world". This amounts to saying that the Buddha is *supramundane* (*lokottara*), and all Buddhists are intimately convinced of this. It remains to be seen what the nature of this transcendence is. Two responses each comprising an infinity of nuances have been proposed. Under the pressure of religious sentiment, certain *Hīnayānist* sects, followed by the great *Mahāyānist* schools, withdraw the Buddha from the world of becoming and do not recognize any form of existence in him: his manifestation in the world is a pure and simple fiction, provoked, he is true, with great compassion. Other *Hinayanist* sects, interpreting the old canonical texts, give a more rational answer: *Śakyamuni*, during his last existence and after his enlightenment, was both man and Buddha, or more exactly Buddha while remaining temporarily a man. He was man by the series of the five impure *upādānaskandha*; he becomes Buddha, *Arhat* and *Samyaksambuddha* through the series of the five pure *Skandhas* brought to their perfection. At the moment of his *Parinirvāṇa*, the two series of *Skandha* vanish and there is nothing more in common between the Buddha and the world of becoming, subject to causality, defiled by ignorances and passions. The *Parinirvāṇa* is *Vimukti*, liberation, total emancipation; the liberated is indefinable, because having left the world of causality, he escapes the categories of existence and non-existence and can neither be affirmed nor denied. He is *Pāragū* "passed to the other side". However the truths which he discovered, the standards which he defined remain always valid; they are, in the metaphorical sense of the word, the Body of the Law (*dharmakāya*) of the Buddha.